

DOROTHY ELLEN PALMER

When
Penelon
Falls





*when
Fenelon
Falls*

Dorothy Ellen Palmer

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Although the places in *When Fenelon Falls* are real, the characters are fictional, the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is coincidental – except for Yogi the bear, who really did live in a cage in Rosedale, Ontario.

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*To my good witches of the north, Dale Nevison and
Marianne Froehlich, and to the wonderful wizard
who is my daughter, Severn Nelson.*

If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.

– George Bernard Shaw

It was a wind with a woman's name that caused the trouble ... Hazel, fickle and frantic, had come to call with all her fury.

– CBC Archives for Hurricane Hazel, October 15, 1954

*Now many moons and many Junes have passed since we made land.
A salty dog, this seaman's log: your witness my own hand.*

– 'A Salty Dog,' Procol Harum

ALONG CAME JONES

In the summer of 1969, I ran full speed into a bear cage – one complete with bear. But don't break out the bagpipes. That August 17 at 4:37 p.m. was one clean moment in an otherwise down and dirty summer, a heat of error, envy and malevolent stupidity. There's no easy explanation and little excuse. I was a kid; I was sick of being blown around by my baby sister; I had to put someone out of her misery. All true, but not all the answer you deserve. The only answer my reckless teenage self could see was a dancing bear. So I partnered one.

The tale is forty years and counting, years I've spent asking, 'How do I begin?' Jordan would have called that 'The Seminal Question, Pun Intended,' but I lack her wits and her wit. I'm kiltless, so bear with me. Unless you count the impersonal sagacity of Scottish proverbs, this memoir has no wardrobe of family lore to dress the scene. I own no letters tied with ribbon, no journals from front or farm, no family Bible that survived a perilous Atlantic, Gaelic motto intact. For these beginnings, there's nothing to do but pull up your stool and sit down.

We'll make do with living memory. With the sound of a cowbell ringing on the night of the moonwalk, Sunday, July 20. With a sunset on Balsam Lake, one rude day's end that left my sister on the dock, her feet in the water, her back to the path. Like her, you'll have to make do with me. Me at fifteen. One year her elder and an easy foot taller. Straight black hair, bone thin and criminally self-important. What am I doing? Memory has me fetching her, running from the cottage in a flickering of shadow like one of my father's home movies. I'd call myself her less-than-dutiful errand boy. Her legs man. Her second pair of worse-than-useless shoes. But when memory isn't lying outright, it leaves things right out. There's always a more inclusive truth, and here it is. That night and any other day? Same difference. I was always out to get her. It was the hallmark of that silver summer. My lone hunting season.

That's pathos you're hearing, not self-pity. And good intentions, but President Kennedy was bang on when he said we all know where that paving leads. For me it leads to our dock, to the moment where for once I arrived in time, just as the sun melted into the bay beyond. Flame encircled my sister's head. When she turned to me, I was blind and she was beatified – a corona of wild copper, a Medusa ablaze. Do myth and martyrdom seem improbably entwined, this early in the story? Good. This is a yarn of tangled tale ends, unravelled by me, a classic tail-ender. Ghastly puns? A snock-snarled lore of mixed metaphor and multiple beginnings? Welcome to the clan.

'C'mon! It's almost time to walk on the moon!' No reaction. 'It's safe, kiddo. They're acting like nothing happened.' In the slightest of movements, my sister lowered her head. Cicadas answered for her. Impatience answered for me. 'Can it, BS! I won't miss Neil Armstrong just because you're slower than molasses in January.'

Splashing stopped. A spine slumped. Corkscrew curls drooped red on worn grey boards.

BS? Short for Baby Sister and the obvious – terms more than synonymous in my book. And molasses in January? Perhaps it flows faster the other eleven months of the year. In any event, here's your first taste of Marchspeak, my family name and mother tongue, and the first tinge of regret. Mine, that is – yours comes later. Truth be told, twenty-plenty awaits us both.

The cowbell commanded a second time. Still in Sunday best, BS pulled off her glasses and scoured them on the hem of that stupid yellow sundress. Like they held all the dirt on the planet. Twisting it like a length of rope, she knotted her hair. She sighed, coaxed a reluctant left foot, struggled into shoes. A clear moment to stop for sorry, a gift I didn't take.

She stood, gained her balance and shrugged. 'Lead on, MacBluff!'

'What? We've been counting down for weeks and on *the night*, you don't care?'

Her answer took eons and was, of course, another question. 'Guess what Leonardo da Vinci called the greatest engineering device known to man?'

'What? The rocket? Something he invented? The helicopter or the submarine?'

‘Nope. The human foot.’ She hefted one of hers. ‘See?’ The heavy black leather of her new corrective oxfords caught the last line of sun. ‘It’s imperfectly perfect.’

I didn’t know what to say to that. None of us did. Never at a loss for words, my family has no language for loss. So I got snarky. ‘Well, Miss Imperfect, it’s the twentieth century. Leo would be far more impressed by us, by our feet on the moon! Now that’s perfect.’ I figured I’d topped her. For once. She let me gloat the length of the path. More would have been illusory.

‘Our feet? Really? And who is this *us*?’ She’d clomped each stair for matching emphasis, but turned on the landing. ‘And just exactly what will a dirty footprint or two on a dead and distant celestial body actually change? *For us*, I mean?’

‘Don’t be a retard. It changes everything!’ I beat her to the door.

‘Sure thing.’ She pushed past me. ‘Presto! It’ll heal the lame. Presto encore! It’ll find the lost and free Yogi. And presto miraculous! It’ll turn Aunt May and MC into –’

‘Jordan May March!’ MC’s stilettos announced her arrival from the addition. She folded her *Toronto Star* under one arm to retie the silk bow on her pink sweater. Combat-ready, her orders followed: ‘Speak when you’re spoken to. Do what you’re bidden. And for goodness’ sake, come when you’re called! If you want to join us, Missy, you’d best be silent.’

‘Roger Wilco, Mother Control!’ Jordan saluted her. ‘Per-Mission Controlled. Maintaining radio silence, as per standing orders. Private Almost March over and –’

‘Enough, Little Miss Trench Mouth! Never run faster than your shoes.’ MC smiled. ‘Last time I checked yours, dear, you were *probably* a girl. Please consider acting like one.’

Jordan fired me a glance that said, ‘See?’ She turned, wound her arms into a hostile pretzel and levelled Mom a look that yelled, ‘So?’

‘Fix your face right now, Missy Sourpuss. No one here’s at war but you.’ MC grabbed her *Star*, rolled it tight, and tapped high heels forward. ‘One ridiculous little girl determined to be her own worst enemy!’ Newsprint swatted flies on Jordan’s head, ‘You march, March! No TV till KP.’ ‘KP’? A wartime expression: Kitchen Patrol. And ‘march, March’? All the aunts and uncles used that one. Perhaps it had been marginally clever the first time.

MC's flyswatter morphed to cattle prod, administered in jolts to Jordan's back. 'Get a move on, Missy, and do us all a favour: drain that sarcasm with the dishwasher.'

'Really, Mother? Aren't you afraid I'll pollute the lake?'

'Hmh ... Flatter yourself, Gypsy Sue, and no one else will.'

'Hmmmh ... No one else will anyway.'

Mother slapped a rolled-and-ready baseball bat into her palm. 'Dawted daughters can bear little. So, no, I've never coddled you. You can thank me later. For now, try being more like those other March girls, the ones in that blankie of a book you're forever carrying about. They did their chores cheerfully. Please consider your imitation the highest form of flattery.'

Jordan sniffed. 'Please consider My Book to be mine.'

'No, dear, I read *Little Women* too – when I was a child.' MC flattened bat to sword and thrust it. 'Here, stick this and yourself in the swamp. And don't come back into *my* house until you're ready to clean up your act *and* the dishes.' She smiled. 'Use that overactive imagination of yours. Pretend to be any March you like – Meg, Jo, Beth or Amy – but get out the tea and cookies. Let's use the Good Melmac, shall we, sweetie?' 'Melmac'? Don't ask. Indestructible post-war plastic made of God-knows-what-and-won't-be-telling.

'Don't be a retard!' Jordan mimicked as she clomped past me. 'Everything! It changes everything!' But march she did, straight to the swamp and back to the suds.

Thus passed One Giant Leap for Mankind, the defining step of a warring century. It left little impression on our own perfectly imperfect Tokyo Rose broadcasting cheerfully from the kitchen sink: 'Sea of Tranquility, my asp! Drain that sarcasm, Sweetie Snookums. Good one, Smarmy Marmee! What were you thinking, Cinderella, hm? I said, *hmmh*! Of course the likes of you can't go to the Moon Ball!' We ignored her. She dropped a stack of the Good Melmac – a fine Canadiana Green as opposed to the everyday Canadiana Brown – held her nose and intoned, 'Houston, Inequity Base here. The Melmac has landed!' Dad and I broke rank and laughed at that one. Come on, we had to. You would have too. But when MC squinted in our direction, 'Who brings a staff to break his own head?' we caved right quick. We knew which side our bread was buttered on and who held the knife.

Literally short on stand-up, my sister leaned on the counter switching feet like a wounded flamingo, alternately hooking one heavy shoe and then the other over the calf of the standing leg. Then she caved too. We heard the soft rasp of a wooden stool on linoleum. Mom used it for dishes, but at four-foot-eleven, Jordan was still too short to do so. When she tried, gravity laughed at her. Dirty water cascaded in twin waterfalls down her elbows to the floor.

‘Excuse me, out there – I don’t believe I heard a question!’

Jordan yelled the sigh with the reply, ‘Arrrrrr-Mother-may-I-please-use-your-stool?’

‘You may, Missy Lazybones, but don’t you dare drip water on my clean floor unless of course you want to wash it too. Just stand back up for each dish.’

Jordan blasted into a far less tuneful version of last summer’s dirge from Mr. Lightfoot, no doubt hoping that, on her own black day in July, a quick launch into singing badly would keep her from saying worse. My parents did what they always did when their daughter sang: they turned up the TV. Loud. Louder than necessary. With no other flight path, Jordan did what she always did when they ignored her: she pounded pots and pans and herself into the domestic order of silence we called home. There’s no place like it. No one heard her questions about peace and brotherhood that night, despite her strident finale, half sung, half screeched and wholly ignored. Why not? As Jordan sang it, because the hands of this have-not keep landing in the sink.

Up the road slept a bear in a cage, her have-not black hands clamped over her eyes. I bet you weren’t asleep. I bet you remember it exactly. Where you were standing and who stood with you, as you lifted your eyes into the night sky. Too young? Perhaps your parents remember. Had they met? Were they even born? Then ask your grandparents. Yes, it’s getting to be that long ago – lifetimes. If you’ve got someone to ask, you’re lucky. You can catalogue chaos, locate yourself in the tumbling of time and space. About family history, about the times before our time, we rely on the telling of others. We become what we tell ourselves.

So when you look up, dear gazer, up from this book or to consider the heavens, do be careful what you wish for, because

every wish defines its opposite. Name your heart's desire and with only the slightest of figuring, the universe learns your heart's despair. If Yogi woke when her captors cased the moon, then she paced the seven steps of home entrapped, back and forth in cave painting – the raw pads of her feet imprinting the concrete pad of her cage with blood. Bear feet are so human. Curved one-inch claws print like five little toes. That's one small step for ursine kind – too small a step for ursine kind. There's nothing kind about it.

For me, that marvellous night for a moon dance marked the end of all things marvellous, and that Summer of Love proffered little or none. It still sings in my head, a haunting Top 30 countdown, the lyrics of mistakes and malice, a libretto laundry list of soiled moments, sour notes I couldn't sing true. It's the muzak to the soundtrack of my mother's voice, hammering home all too many of her maxims, tossed off as if in and of themselves they explained all things, as if they were undemanding lessons. I didn't know she spoke in proverbs. I thought she made them up, thought her wise until years later when I realized a plagiarist is afraid of her own voice. But beggars can't be choosers and if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Because that summer our wishes cut to the crux. Not romantic, birthday-candle, coins-in-a-fountain, wishing-well wishes. Not the song Jiminy Cricket kept on singing and Pinocchio kept on believing until he became a real live boy. Not Cinderella's song, where her heart makes wishes when she's fast asleep. What bloody good is that – to you or anyone else – a wish stuck in dreams? No, our wishes were possible and probable, ones that could have and should have come true. Unfortunately, most of us are more like Pinocchio. We wish for the improbable – wooden, waiting and stuck, expecting some god somewhere to pull some strings.

Except Jordan. She hated Pinocchio, considered him more kindling than kin. She'd have kicked him in his knotty little ass or, worse, chased him with an axe. It wouldn't be the first time. She'd holler, 'Quit yer quiddling, pea brain!' She'd smack him down and not let him up until he got it: 'Sure you've got strings, but you've also got a tongue and opposable thumbs. Ergo, you're both; you're Puppet Boy. Don't ask permission. Dance if you bloody well feel like it!' She'd say the same thing to him as she'd want me to say to you: 'Wishes *are* horses. So don't be a stupid beggar, *jump on and ride!*'

And if Jiminy doffed his ridiculously oversized hat, slithered to Pinocchio's shoulder to whisper blasphemy in his ear, if that meddling cricket tempted anyone in my sister's hearing with the lie that being a real live boy would be better than being his true hybrid self, well, Jordan would squash that bug for what he was – a snake.